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ABSTRACT

A commercial Spanish course offered at Marywood College (Scranton, Pennsylvania) serves both Spanish majors and majors in international business. In addition to language proficiency activities common to most commercial language courses, students have identified two projects as most functional and challenging: (1) a "carpeta" or file into which students placed all graded business correspondence exercises, which they felt best reflected their growth and accomplishments in the course; and (2) individual in-depth study of one multinational company and exposure to several others in the course of the class, which reduced their fears of the foreign business world. Both projects began in the first week of class and were carried on through two semesters. Commercial terminology is introduced through the text and reinforced in correspondence exercises. Study in Madrid is an integral part of the many international business students' programs, and students prepare for the time abroad by studying Spanish culture and media. (MSE)

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Commercial Spanish: Developing Proficiencies and Business Practices

By

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Professionals dedicated to the teaching of foreign languages or involved with foreign language study, after surviving a difficult period of decreasing interest and enrollments, now find themselves encouraged by recent studies reflecting renewed interest and enthusiasm for foreign language study. The President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies attests to what has always been known to foreign language advocates; that is, the vital role foreign languages play in national defense and international commerce.

Over the past decade in response to student interest and as a matter of survival, the profession encouraged the teaching of commercial foreign language courses as viable and practical alternatives to traditional language courses.[1] Yet many instructors, trained in language and/or specialized in literary periods, implemented career or applied language study when traditional majors had almost disappeared and course selections were severly limited. Until recently few had envisioned teaching commercial language courses as a permanent and reputable part of the language curriculum. Most had remained optimistic that commercial courses would be transitory. Initially, the poor quality of texts and material attested to the less than serious status afforded such courses. Many instructors considered the time and energy required to develop such courses as poor investments. Few received more than verbal encouragement from college administrators. Nevertheless, commercial language courses have been successfully established on campuses across the United States and are being studied by an energetic and highly motivated group of students confident that their dili-

gence will be rewarded with real career advancements. Although commercial language courses often demand more of an instructor's time and energy than many traditional courses, greater, too, are the rewards from diligent and enthusiastic students who are developing language acquisition and functional business skills.

Introduced four years ago, Marywood's Commercial Spanish is a six-credit course offered to Spanish majors and to majors in International Business with a concentration in Spanish. The course is conducted in Spanish and, therefore, students generally enroll either their junior or senior year. Class meets three times a week with class size varying between fifteen and twenty students. The past two years the texts Al dia en los negocios: Escribamos and Al dia en los negocios: Hablemos (New York: Random House, 1985) were used concurrently for both semesters. These texts not only offer an excellent variety of material, they also lend themselves to further development of topics according to the instructor's expertise and student goals. Periodicals, newspapers, films, videos, and material obtained abroad afford students real and meaningful exposure to the business world of Spanish-speaking countries.

In addition to language proficiency activities common to most commercial language courses, students at Marywood College identified the following projects to be the most functional and challenging. It was the carpeta, a tangible product of their labor, which students felt best reflected their growth and accomplishments. They also stated that their individual involvement with one multinational company and their exposure to several others

lessened their fears of the foreign business world. Both projects were begun the first weeks of class and carried through two semesters.

The first day of class is inevitably the most difficult for both the instructor with his specific and realistic goals and for the student with his real expectations and anxieties. If all such considerations are initially addressed, optimum student performance is greatly enhanced.

Therefore, each student is presented with an individually addressed envelope containing a business letter in formal Spanish style. The letter/syllabus attempts to introduce the course by promoting the skills to be developed if in fact the procedures are followed as stated. Included also is all necessary information such as requirements, projects, texts and examinations. Thus, from the first class students are exposed to Spanish correspondence and proper business procedures.

The first assignment is to respond to this letter. In reality it is merely readjusting the parts of a business letter and paraphrasing the body. Nevertheless, the student's first project is formal, practical, and achievable. It affords the professor insight into individual student's written language skills. All written correspondence is corrected by circling and identifying errors (verb/subject agreement, tense, etc.) Students thus reason through their own grammatical errors and submit a second draft which is then graded. Because of varying abilities and entrance level skills, it is extremely important that students realize they are competing only with themselves.

The atmosphere must be supportive and all activities relevant and purposeful.[2] Each piece of correspondence has a designated audience, usually a classmate. All graded correspondence is then placed into an individual carpeta where students apprize their individual progress and growth.

It is vital that teachers of commercial foreign languages present and utilize functional business knowledge in class. Such activities build upon students' general knowledge of business, and in addition, broaden their knowledge of those countries whose language they are learning. Therefore, the second week of class students are presented with an annotated bibliography of directories of multinational corporations. From this listing, students investigate one or more companies listed on the Spanish stock market (la Bolsa). By the third week of the semester students consult individually with the instructor regarding their selection and proper procedure for charting the company's performance. Students then simulate an investment of cien mil pesetas (one thousand dollars) in one or more of the companies. The instructor keeps an index card of each student's investment and adjustments. Students are then responsible to keep informed of their companies progress and to report bimonthly the status of their investment from the quotations of la Bolsa de Madrid to the class. Oral reports are presented in Spanish. Not only is this activity advantageous to the student's growth in business dealings, its competitive nature translates what may be a tedious activity (reading the financial section of a foreign newspaper) into an exciting experience for the student. Moreover, the brief bimonthly class presentation fa-

cilitates students' mastering of specialized vocabulary and affords them ease and confidence in what ultimately becomes a routine oral presentation.

In an effort to further develop oral and written skills based upon practical business activities, the instructor presents each student with an individually designed ad for a position with one of the multinational firms selected by another student. It is the instructor's responsibility to compose the ads so that students respond to the company of a different classmate. The first phase is to write a letter answering the ad and requesting an interview for said position. Students may again submit a second draft before the letter is graded. The letter of application is then given to the student who has that company's stock and he responds by granting an interview. In directed class activities all students prepare for a general interview. In addition the instructor works closely with each student interviewer to develop specific questions reflecting his company's specialized needs. The student applicant also is knowledgeable about the company's rating and performance from the bimonthly oral presentations. Thus each is preparing for the interview and is gaining considerable in-depth knowledge of at least two multinational companies.

Terminology of commercial transactions is introduced through the text. Students become familiar with bills of lading, lines of credit, bills of exchange, etc. by working with authentic documents obtained overseas and reproduced. Once the studetnt is comfortable with the basic terminology, the instructor provides additional terminology and abbreviations common in Spanish commercial corres-

pondence. The next assignment is a letter to the import/export division of a different multinational company quoting F.O.B. prices requesting quotations on the international market as well as specifics on the shipping of merchandise, consular invoice, etc. Again each student both requests information and responds for the company in which he holds stock. Individual student carpetas continue to grow. This section ends with each group's reacting to an emergency situation. They may practice the newly acquired terminology orally by placing an international call or by perfecting their editing skills by preparing a telex.

It is perhaps the in-depth involvement with the daily functions of one multinational company as well as constant exposure to the multinational companies of fellow classmates, which enhances both ease of language acquisition and functional business procedures for students. Moreover, students constantly draw from skills and knowledge acquired in regular business courses (marketing, management, finance, etc.) to accomplish directed language-skill activities in banking, establishing lines of credit, letras de cambio, etc. for their individual company. An assignment on advertising, for example, increases in relevance when students view newspaper and magazine ads from the perspective of their own company or that of one of their classmates. Thus practical business skills, as well as activities for language acquisition and cultural awareness compliment each other, while reinforcing and broadening students' learning experiences.

Most international business students at Marywood (96%) study abroad. Many concentrating in Spanish attend La Universidad

Politécnica de Madrid. Students are spared initial culture shock by interchange with faculty all of whom are natives or have studied and lived abroad, by cultural contacts in the community, and by upperclassmen returning from overseas. Nevertheless, because the psychology of the culture being studied is as important in the business world as the knowledge of the language, special attention is afforded the students before their travel. Informal research requirements are placed on those students unable to study overseas. Marywood professors maintain close overseas contacts and foreign correspondence is often answered, and authentic documents, forms, articles, etc. are readily available. Moreover, current Spanish periodicals, newspapers, films, videos, and slides reinforce cultural values and attitudes which have been previously addressed in language and culture courses, advanced composition and conversation courses, and literature or professional language courses which are prerequisites for the commercial course. Students also are made aware of current research[3] and current blunders (Braniff's "sentado en cuero"), which heighten their sensitivity to both language and culture.

As today's college students continue to pursue those courses they deem practical and career relevant, commercial language courses are growing in importance and scope. Commercial language courses afford both language and business students valuable experience and expertise for today's competitive business world. At Marywood College student involvement and interest are intense. Class activities and projects encourage creative inter-student communication and cooperation. Commercial foreign language courses

are attracting increased attention and may soon become the focal point of the foreign language department.